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## Bibliotekistan: A Tour of Libraries in Kyrgyzstan

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# Bibliotekistan:

## A Tour of Libraries in Kyrgyzstan

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Six years ago, I would have been hard-pressed to point to Kyrgyzstan on a map, let alone put all those consonants in anything like the proper order. Central Asia conjured hazy pictures of horses riding across high plains with enormous mountains in the distance. But I was lucky enough to find out not only where Kyrgyzstan is and how to spell it, but to spend two weeks exploring this wonderful country in the company of a lively group of dedicated librarians. And yes, there are horses riding across the plains against a backdrop of stunning mountains.

In the fall of 2005, I went to Kyrgyzstan in the good company of librarians Daniel Peterson and Christine Hanolsy from the World Affairs Council. We were invited to visit the Kyrgyz librarians who had come to Oregon in 2004, as part of the World Affairs Council of Oregon's *Community Connections* program, which brought professionals from Eurasia to the U.S. to learn about American communities, businesses, and organizations.

Kyrgyzstan is the smallest of several Central Asian republics that were part of the Soviet Union in "former times" as our Kyrgyz friends call them; times that seem to loom very large over the present. Its longest borders are with China and Kazakhstan; the majority of the population are Kyrgyz Muslims. Theirs has been a nomadic culture, and to some extent, it is still. But there is a great interest in education, libraries and preservation of their proud history, even when that means establishing more Western-influenced institutions.

Our itinerary took us as far away from Oregon as one can possibly go, I thought. It took the better part of two days to get to Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, on this route: Portland-Cincinnati-New York-Istanbul-Bishkek.

Our layover in Istanbul was long enough for us to tear into the city with a manic taxi driver and spend a few hours walking little cobblestone streets, past rug shops and tea shops



Young performers at the Uzgen Library.



and beautiful little doorways near the Blue Mosque. This was the first time I heard the call to prayer echoing, a beautiful sound we were to hear many more times.

The drill each day was to visit libraries, but they varied from visits with higher-ups at places like the Humanities University to homey tours of small town libraries, complete with singing and dancing. Daniel and Christine, thankfully, both speak Russian, but in some places there was a need for triple translation, from Kyrgyz to Russian to English. They were terrific traveling companions, with great language and people skills, and in Daniel's case, very useful and entertaining juggling expertise, which came in handy more than once.



Daniel Peterson juggling for our hosts.

Libraries in Kyrgyzstan are typically closed-stack education-oriented institutions, with some computer and Internet access. Part of the mission of the Kyrgyz visitors to Oregon was to learn more about American public libraries. What they accomplished in the interim before we came to visit was truly remarkable. Two things really stood out: the creation of children's rooms with books and programming, and the opening of public law libraries. In the post-Soviet world of Kyrgyzstan, this represents huge progress, promoting the idea that citizens may do research and learn about the workings of the government, freely.

When we had finished touring university and government libraries in Bishkek, we began a long road trip through the country. Travelling in the company of some of our host librarians, our eventual destination was the city of Osh, where the program alumni were converging for a conference in which we were presenting.

We set out for Jalal-Abad, very early in the morning, driving towards the mountains in a large van. A few kilometers down the road, our hostesses explained with great glee that we each had to drink 100 grams of vodka to celebrate the beginning of our trip. Out came a brand spanking new bottle of vodka and glasses and there we were, careening down the road, drinking vodka from an open bottle. This was daunting to me at first. But it began to





seem normal when done in the company of six or seven mostly middle-aged librarians! Out came chicken and bread and tomatoes, and it was party on. All of this started well before 9 a.m. and went on for quite a while.

As we drove up into the gorgeous mountains, we encountered jagged peaks, small glaciers and patches of snow and steep switchbacks. Yurts were sprinkled across the landscape, along with Soviet-era train cars with families living in them. These families were selling honey and koumiss, a fermented mare's milk. Men and boys on horses along with herds of goats and sheep roamed meadows crossed by clean rushing rivers. Everywhere there were donkey carts and burros walking along with women and children. We stopped to rest beside a stream tumbling down a hillside, and out came a picnic of mutton, sausage bread, grapes, vodka and bottled water—just a snack.



A family selling fermented mare's milk on the roadside.

One of our first stops was the Toktugul Cultural Center, which houses the Toktugul Library, named after a revolutionary songwriter and singer beloved throughout Kyrgyzstan. A fabulously dressed welcoming band of singers and musicians greeted us, and beautiful children handed us bouquets of flowers. The singing was wonderful: lively harmonies accompanied by accordion and the komuz, the three-stringed local instrument.

They had been told not to prepare a feast or even lunch, because we were stopping later for lunch. Hospitality is essential and extraordinary in Kyrgyzstan, so that request was very enthusiastically ignored. Inside there were long tables set in a u-shape, with the three of us in the place of honor. Piles of beautiful bread and fried pastries, bowls of perfect apples and grapes, wild honey, special jams made from wild berries, tea and vodka were on the tables. This was overwhelming enough, but the grand finale was an array of dishes made from the sheep they had killed in our honor, including the head for Daniel, as the honored man in our delegation.

As we ate, we were entertained with a wonderful concert. Women in brilliant costumes and hats decorated with fur and plumes sang to us and there was a fantastic performance by a 10-year-old girl who is an accomplished singer of Kyrgyz traditional songs, accompanied by her father on the komuz.

We spent the next week traveling throughout the country, greeted like royalty everywhere we went, touring libraries and enjoying our conversations with librarians along the way. Schoolchildren and townspeople performed for us in many places, singing in their full-throated style, dressed in lavish costumes, the men always in some variation of the traditional Kyrgyz white wool felt conical hat. At every stop there were feasts for us, their honored guests, some of them served in beautifully carpeted traditional yurts.

A few generalizations can be made about the libraries that we saw in Kyrgyzstan. Many of the libraries had computers, but Internet access was not universal, or at least it wasn't in 2005. Computerized catalogs were coming, but slowly, and for the most part they were still using hand-written cards in card catalogs. They don't use Dewey Decimal, but a Russian classification called BBK. Most libraries have books in Russian and Kyrgyz, the two official languages, and usually a small collection of books in other languages. The further south you go, the more prevalent the Kyrgyz language. In Bishkek, most people, even ethnic Kyrgyz, speak Russian first.

Two libraries stand out in my memory as stellar examples of what these dedicated, passionate women had accomplished. One was in the sad town of Mailuu-Suu. In "former times," during the Soviet era, it was the site of a uranium mine and very important in the development of the atomic bomb for the USSR. But that time has ended and the town is struggling, even though it has a large light bulb factory. It is now one of the most polluted places on earth, but its residents have few choices, other than to emigrate to Russia for work, as reported by NPR: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18666435>.



Guests at a library grand opening – note the Kyrgyz headgear.







Christine, Daniel and  
I chronicled our trip in  
*Bibliotekistan:*  
*The Great Silk Blog*,  
which is available here:  
<http://tinyurl.com/66yz8ar>



Children enjoying their new library.

We met Valentin, the English teacher, who had studied in the U.S. and who told us about the 700 students in the school and how he is able to teach them with almost no resources. Their English textbooks were almost completely disintegrated, repaired over and over, and dated from the Soviet era, complete with references to Lenin. Ludmila, the librarian who joined our group here, showed us around and gave us tea and cookies. She had managed to create a colorful and welcoming place in their school library, with very little but hope and ingenuity.

The other library was in a village in the Osh region, where one of the alumni from the trip to Oregon, Myrzaim, had done wonders to create a beautiful and welcoming children's room in the village library. Myrzaim had raised about 800,000 soms (\$20,000) from her local community, as well as some grant money from various sources to rebuild the library itself. We were at the ribbon cutting ceremony; in fact, Christine cut the ribbon with the town mayor! Myrzaim credited her success to her U.S. trip in 2004, where she was completely entranced with the Multnomah County Central Library's Children's Room. The highlight of this day was when a flock of very young children, their faces outlined by huge cutout sunflowers, marched out to sing to us.

In both places, and indeed, all of the places we visited in Kyrgyzstan, I was deeply moved by the joy these librarians took in their work and their dedication to the idea that libraries are important. They are really making wonderful use of what they learned in the West to preserve their own language and culture, and to seize the relative freedom of the post-Soviet era. 🌻

